

## **Freedom in Times of Pandemic: Chinese International Students’ Readings of Human Rights Criticism During the UK’s First COVID-19 Lockdown**

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### **Abstract**

*This research project set out to study how Chinese international students in the United Kingdom understand human rights principles. The principal method involved semi-structured interviews which were primarily intended as an exploratory exercise giving participants the opportunity to voice their views on human rights. The discussions were explicitly centered on participants’ own definitions and understandings. The interviews coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite holding conflicted views on the subject, most participants sought to legitimize China’s human rights record. While their reactions echo Stanley Cohen’s acclaimed study of human rights denial, sufficient distinction needs to be made between state actors’ denial and citizen denial. Participants’ struggle to trust foreign media reports, their reappraisal of their circumstances during the pandemic and their lack of exposure to human rights abuse acted as barriers in acknowledging China’s human rights violations. These findings highlight the need for an inclusive pedagogy which is capable of accommodating the various iterations of the imagined community through which expatriate Chinese students view human rights criticism targeted at China.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, denial, human rights, imagined community, international student mobility

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### **Introduction**

What kind of meaning do Chinese international students studying at UK universities give to human rights? That is the principal research question at the heart of this study. Human rights remain an incendiary and heavily censored topic in the People’s Republic of China. Official Chinese government discourse has been described as “double speak” which paints

liberal human rights as a Western threat to the stability of the party-state (Chen & Hsu, 2018). Strong official opposition to liberal human rights in China belies the fact that international charters such as the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHR) bear the hallmarks of traditional Chinese values and Confucian philosophy (Tseng, 2017). Despite long-standing pressure from the international community and significant economic reforms transforming China into a global economic player, a political liberalization has yet to take place in the country. From a Western perspective, human rights are principally defined as the classic complement of basic, inalienable rights enjoyed by all human beings which have been laid down as a matter of law in international treaties and domestic constitutions. However, this approach, with its emphasis on individual liberty, is contested in a Chinese context. Instead, Chinese human rights doctrine places good governance and the state's capacity to provide for its citizens at the core of human rights (Chen & Hsu, 2018).

Chinese international students studying in the United Kingdom (UK) may struggle to recognize the significance of Western human rights doctrine and understand its practical application because relevant principles remain unmentionable in Chinese higher education itself (Tseng, 2017). The rationale for this project was to identify ways of engaging this particular student population better in human rights teaching in UK higher education which is largely premised on the idea that human rights exist to protect citizens against undue state interference with their individual liberty. It has been rightly argued that the ascendancy of human rights as the hallmark of cosmopolitanism is the product of specific historical circumstances, as "there is nothing natural, let alone inevitable, about ordering societies around the idea of universally equal and unalienable human rights" (Madsen & Verschraegen, 2013, p. 6). However, it is also the case that human rights are the prevailing currency of international law according to which there can be no legitimate statehood without at least a semblance of respect for human rights. For better or for worse, human rights are the yardstick used by the international community to measure individual freedom in a global context (Douzinas, 2000).

The status bestowed on human rights matters greatly in an international education system which is still dominated by Western ideology. An absence of human rights awareness may leave some international students vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation (Marginson, 2012). Because of their cultural background or national origins, many international students in the West are not well versed in the core principles of human rights and may struggle with many aspects of the curriculum across a range of academic disciplines. Human rights should not just be conceptualized as taught content, but also as something that is embedded in academic practice itself, for example, in the form of research ethics. The purpose of this paper is to encourage a wider debate about achieving an inclusive human rights pedagogy in the context of international higher education. Educators should not take students' familiarity with human rights as a given but should instead commit to providing ample opportunity for debating and appropriately interrogating such concepts (Douzinas, 2000).

The principal method used in this study involved semi-structured interviews which were primarily intended as an exploratory exercise giving participants the opportunity to voice their views on human rights. The discussions were explicitly centered on participants' own definitions and understandings. The interviews coincided with the first national COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. The COVID-19 Pandemic proved more than circumstantial. The interviews, ten in total, reflected the increasing tensions between China and the US over the pandemic, with US President Donald Trump effectively blaming China for failing to stop the virus (Zhao, 2020) and making pejorative references to the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu" (Yu, 2021b). Moreover, with university life ground to a halt, students were living in an almost deserted university town, unable to return to China owing to the limited availability of flights and expensive airfares. As a result, they found themselves in a state of limbo, cut off from direct contact with both British and Chinese society. Reports of racial abuse targeted at Chinese and Asian people left some interviewees too frightened to go out, adding to their isolation and feelings of homesickness during the lockdown.

As well as influencing participants' perceptions of human rights, this unique set of circumstances also set the scene for a display of heightened defensive patriotism (Hail, 2015). The irony of having their freedom severely restricted at a time when, according to media reports, the COVID-19 Pandemic had been brought under control in China and citizens there were moving about more freely again was not lost on interviewees. Even neutral and general questions (e.g., "What do you think of when you hear the words 'human rights'?") elicited answers that were explicitly defensive of China. Despite expressing mixed feelings on the subject, research participants mostly sought to legitimize China's human rights record. Their response displays the hallmarks of what Cohen (1996) terms human rights denial. However, whereas it is disingenuous for governments to deny their involvement in human rights abuse, the situation is arguably different when it is citizens doing the denial. The students taking part in this study struggled to trust foreign media reports, which combined with other factors

such as the absence of any direct experience of grave human rights abuse, the Chinese government's control of the media, and students' reappraisal of their own circumstances during the pandemic, rendered their accounts credible and sincere. Moreover, the opposite of denial, an acknowledgment of human rights abuse, would be tantamount to distancing themselves from their country and relinquishing an important part of their own identity in favor of victimhood. While human rights denial is portrayed in the academic literature as a disingenuous speech act, this article will conclude that allowance should be made for the possibility that citizen denial of human rights breaches reflects genuinely held beliefs which help individuals to maintain a positive identification with their imagined community (Anderson, 2006).

The structure of the article is as follows: The first section reviews some of the literature on international student mobility, with a specific focus on Chinese student mobility. The second section outlines the theoretical framework involving Stanley Cohen's work on the performance of denial in response to allegations of human rights violations. The third section sets out the method and research design used in this study. The fourth section presents the findings, exploring the arguments research participants used to explain and legitimize the limitations placed on human rights in China. The fifth section provides a discussion of the principal findings with reference to the concept of denial.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Student Mobility and Chinese Students**

The People's Republic of China sends more students to study abroad than any other country in the world (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). One of the main beneficiaries are UK universities which have seen the number of Chinese students grow by 34% in the period 2014–2019 (Jeffreys, 2020). UK universities are increasingly dependent on the income generated by the admission of Chinese international students and the wider benefits to the UK economy are considerable (Hillman, 2021). How well Chinese students are able to integrate in university life in the UK and the obstacles they face in this regard is a little-studied topic (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). However, a recent study offers a fascinating insight into the social lives of their peers studying at Canadian universities, arguing that interactions with other Chinese international students should not be devalued in favor of integration (Li, 2019). The ethical and political implications of international student mobility, including the fact that international students are increasingly regarded as “cash cows” by the neoliberal Western academe, have also received limited attention (Yang, 2020). It should be noted that these issues are gaining prominence in research (e.g. Sperduti, 2017; Yu, 2021a). Marginson (2012) argues that students from the Global South are often constructed as undesirable “Others” in a Western political discourse which oscillates between praising the perceived benefits their presence brings and cultivating fears that the presence of international students fuels illegal immigration, crime and even terrorism. As temporary migrants, students have reduced access to key services and enjoy fewer rights. Also, a limited command of English is capable of creating significant communication barriers, leaving international students vulnerable and excluded in many areas, making them “second-class” citizens (Marginson, 2012).

Chinese international students are often perceived as passive learners. Challenging this perception, Heng (2020) observes that, instead, they display “agency and resourcefulness” (p. 542) and typically engage in very pro-active ways of problem solving. Several factors explain why Chinese students may be seen as quiet and timid when it comes to their participation in the classroom. Explanations range from students' limited English (for Chinese students overwhelmingly choose to study in English-speaking countries) to cultural factors including the prioritization of a collective mindset (Durkin, 2011), the wider influence of Confucian values (Heng, 2020) and students' fear of embarrassing themselves in front of their peers (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2013). Chinese students at UK universities have to adapt to a very different pedagogy in which independent, critical thinking is prioritized over values such as memorization and passive acceptance of knowledge which typically prevail in the Chinese education system (Zhang, 2021). Overcoming a lack of familiarity with core human rights principles which are taken as a given in Western higher education systems is part of “the culture shock” (Zhang, 2021, p. 233) this particular group of learners need to grapple with. The extent to which Chinese students' silence in the classroom may be an expression of hurt national pride, especially in cases where the teaching is explicitly or implicitly critical of China, is also worth considering.

A relevant study in this regard concerns the way in which the experience of studying abroad may boost Chinese students' patriotic feelings and strengthen their national identity (Hail, 2015). Chinese students studying in the US showed an acute sensitivity to Western criticism of China and saw it as their patriotic duty to defend the official Chinese position on controversial issues such as Tibet, in effect assuming the role of “cultural ambassadors.” Moreover, Hail's (2015) study

suggests that a lack of a sense of belonging in the host country in which they are studying may make Chinese students feel even fonder of their home country, increasing their defensive attitudes vis-à-vis criticism of China. Thus, it is perfectly conceivable that the experience of being stranded abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic (including aggravating factors such as social isolation and xenophobia) will not only have fueled students' desire to return home but also made them more emotionally attached to their "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006), resulting in a display of heightened defensive patriotism. Indeed, Yu (2021b) observes that the effect of COVID-19-related Sinophobia on Chinese student mobility is likely to involve a shift from popular Western destinations such as to US to countries which are more aligned with Chinese culture.

### **Theoretical Construct: Denial of Human Rights Abuse**

The avoidance strategies which governments use to respond to the exposure of human rights abuses form the focus of Stanley Cohen's acclaimed study of human rights denial. His principal concern involves the responses of "perpetrator governments" to allegations of human rights abuse. He argues that: "Three forms of denial appear in the discourse of official responses to allegations about human rights violations: *literal denial* (nothing happened), *interpretative denial* (what happened is really something else), and *implicatory denial* (what just happened is justified)" (Cohen, 1996, p. 522). Furthermore, he notes that these different registers are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are often used simultaneously or sequentially. When faced with visual evidence of human rights perpetrations, it is not uncommon for governments to respond by "shooting the messenger," typically, media organizations and actors may be accused of making up or manipulating footage. "The most common way to imply, rather than assert, literal denial is to attack the reliability, objectivity, and credibility of the observer" (Cohen, 1996, p. 524). Interpretative denial is less of a crude denial of fact than an attempt to "reframe and rename" (Cohen, 1996, p. 526), for example, by having recourse to euphemisms. Implicatory denial, which covers anything from "justifications" and "excuses" to neutralizations, can also take different forms. One such form is "righteousness" described by Cohen as the denial that there are universal human rights values, or alternatively, the claim that there are higher values that take precedence over human rights. Another one is "contextualization and uniqueness" which involves the argument that a country's unique circumstances provide a justification for ignoring human rights values. Yet another expression of implicatory denial is to "condemn the condemners," arguing, for example, that former colonial powers are ill-placed to judge the state of human rights in countries that historically suffered greatly at their hands (Cohen, 1996, p. 533). As we will see, implicatory denial featured prominently in the interviews analyzed below.

Cohen's analysis, which is mainly concerned with governmental denial, has been expanded to include media audiences and the citizens of perpetrator states. Seu's (2010) study of different ways of "doing denial" focuses on how audiences justify their lack of action in response to campaigns that seek to bring human rights abuses to their attention. Crucially, this type of research demonstrates that it is not just states but ordinary people too who are implicated in denying responsibility for human rights violations. Sutton and Norgaard (2013) highlight how citizens' avoidance strategies are part and parcel of "cultures of denial," even when their own administration is implicated in human rights abuse. Moreover, such denial by citizens can occur irrespective of whether the government in question is a democracy or an authoritarian regime. Citizens may wish to keep silent or refuse to know certain information as a way of coping with human rights abuses perpetrated by their own governments (Sutton & Norgaard, 2013). Unlike official state denial, citizen denial can be simply a matter of self-preservation, as it is a potential way for individuals to maintain a positive national identity in the face of international opprobrium. Indeed, according to Anderson (2006), such is the cohesive power of the imagined community that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p. 7). Evidently, denial performed by citizens should not be put in the same league as state denial. The cost of openly recognizing the failings of one's own government may be much too high for citizens, whereas state actors have a choice when it comes to upholding human rights.

### **Method**

The principal research question of this study is: "What kind of meaning do Chinese international students studying at UK universities give to human rights?" The research methods consisted of semi-structured interviews with 10 individual students. The interviews took place in May and June 2020.

#### **Participants**

The participants were all MA social sciences and humanities students enrolled at a university in the East Midlands, with their enrollment typically lasting 12 months. These students often stay in private rented accommodation. It is not unusual for them to be sharing a flat or house with other Chinese students. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the responsible research ethics committee. Recruitment of participants was achieved by circulating an open email invitation to Chinese international students. Interested students were provided with a participant information sheet containing detailed information about the project. In order to take part in the interviews, participants were required to sign a consent form outlining, among other things, the project's data management protocol.

### **Data Collection**

The interview script was organized around a list of open-ended questions, in line with established principles of qualitative research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Strauss, 1987). The first question inquired into students' familiarity with human rights by asking them if they had come across any human rights-related topics in their course content. This was followed up by questions about what human rights meant to them and whether these had any positive or negative connotations. The third main group of questions concerned the issue of how well human rights were protected in China. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 53 minutes and one hour and 43 minutes. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality in line with standard principles of research ethics. For the purpose of dissemination, they were all assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The lockdown made face-to-face interviews impossible. Instead, the interviews took place in the virtual space afforded by Skype, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom.

One of the challenges was that participants had varying levels of proficiency in English, which, due to the lockdown situation, some had not spoken or had not spoken frequently for a few months. One interviewee said that they felt nervous about the interview for this reason while another apologized extensively for their limited English. To minimize misunderstanding and enhance the interaction, the interviewer summarized what the interviewee had said at regular intervals. Special care was taken to ensure that the interviewer was not putting any words into interviewees' mouth (Prior, 2014). This was achieved by cross-checking their understanding of what participants said. Similarly, interviewees were actively invited to seek clarification of anything that was not clear. They were encouraged to use a translator app or a dictionary as and when required. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcripts were manually coded and thematically analyzed following the process outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). This involved tagging responses for the three main topics raised by the interviewer to identify "repeating ideas" which were subsequently organized into broader themes and constructs that could be linked to theory. The "non-scripted" parts of the interviews were similarly coded by mapping out repeating ideas. This exercise resulted in the identification of three additional themes providing a theoretical link to human rights denial: the media and human rights, COVID-19, and Hong Kong. A discussion of principal themes is provided in the next section.

## **Findings**

For nine of the interviewees, all from mainland China, a distinct pattern emerged in that their responses displayed characteristics of defensive patriotism. The tenth interview was an outlier in this respect: the interviewee in question identified as an Ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong. As a native Hong Kong citizen, Chen strongly opposed the policies that the Chinese Government is pursuing vis-à-vis the former British colony following its handover by the UK in 1997. Consequently, a denial of human rights violations did not figure in this interview. By contrast, Fen, who was actively involved in the Chinese Communist Party, expressed no criticism of China's human rights record. The eight other participants were more nuanced in their assessment of the human rights situation in China. Compared to males ( $n = 4$ ), female participants ( $n = 6$ ) overall tended to be less critical, but it is hard to make any generalizations on the basis of such a small sample.

### **Human Rights Are "Not Chinese"**

One of the most striking responses to the opening question (whether participants had previously encountered human rights in taught content) came from Jia:

Human rights? Actually, when considering human rights, I often link it to the Western culture of modern civilization because I think in China, in Chinese history or Chinese culture, I don't think we have this conception, because even if I learned this conception in my politics books when I was in high school, and I also think this conception is from

Western culture or Western context. Maybe, maybe in a Chinese context, we also have this this idea ... maybe we have another name, but I'm not sure.

Rather than answering with a straightforward "yes" or "no," Jia chose to explain *why* she had not previously been taught about human rights. Her explanation was that human rights were simply not Chinese.

Huang, another participant, gave a very similar response when asked what human rights meant to him:

Human rights, really, we don't think it is important topic. For me, maybe for most of Chinese students, because our background is it rather different, I think. Due to historical reasons, China has only been remembered in recent years thanks to 5G and Huawei, maybe compared with [the rest of the] world, for democratic rights we should obtain. And we are actually more focused on the economy or how to make money and live a better life [than to] get ... human rights. And I think sometimes we don't have that idea, that much [of an] idea about human rights.

The same explanation was offered by Hui:

Honestly, in China, we don't mention this term too much, but we can, you can see some news that in some places, some people are not treated justly. So, I sometimes I'll think about this topic. That's because schools, our universities in China and the official media don't give much information about human rights. So, mostly I try to surf the information on the Internet and to find [out about] the human rights situation in China, but there is many misinformation. So, it is pretty hard for me to detect which is wrong or right.

The deixis "we" in these excerpts is used to mean "Chinese students" and "Chinese people," positioning the interviewer as an outsider who needed to be made aware that human rights were "not Chinese." This argument should not be taken as an unequivocal defense of China's human rights record. For example, take this exchange with Wen:

Wen: I think human rights for me is important, is very important and very basic. But I can't discuss the human rights with my classmates, especially the Chinese, because to some extent it's like a joke.

Interviewer: Like a joke?

Wen: Yeah, it's like a joke.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Wen: Because I think one part of the human rights is the free speech.

Interviewer: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Wen: I can quote everything. I want to talk and we have somebody... But, you know, the censorship in China or whatever in the traditional media or the social media has become harder and harder. Yeah, especially after 2012.

Interestingly, later in the interview, Wen accused the West of complicity in allowing the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in China in 1989 to go unpunished because of naked self-interest. In this sense, their stance still has a pre-emptive quality: Part of the blame for the state of human rights in China, in their view, needs to be shouldered by the wider international community.

Fen also chose to turn the spotlight on the situation in the West in response to the question of what human rights meant to her:

And I do think this is a tough issue for me to answer. I mean, in the UK where some people say, 'oh, you don't have any freedom of speech or something,' but I don't think so ... Yes, I have more freedom of expression here [in the UK]. But I also face some discrimination here, for example, because of the coronaviruses, some people here just point at me and say 'Chinese virus,' that's another angle of this issue. But in China, we have such a large population, different regions, different traditions ... I mean, it's just a different situation for us to think about this issue.

### **Make Money, Get a Better Life**

Having established early on that Chinese citizens' enjoyment of human rights is different and, in some ways, is more limited than it is in the West, participants spent some time considering what life is like under these circumstances. In other words, they tried to explain how freedom is possible within the specific context of Chinese society. One way of doing this was to argue that they did have certain freedoms, but just chose not to make use of these. Take the following exchange with Jia:

Interviewer: And do you have enough freedom of expression you feel?

Jia: Oh, well, for me, I know our laws allow us to do this, but I seldom express my opinion on my social media or something like that. So, I couldn't give my own opinion because I have less, less experience. But I would if I, if I, needed to express my opinion, I think I can express them without hesitation.

Ling's comments on cultural reticence and free speech similarly reflect the value of 'positive energy,' in essence, favoring optimistic and non-critical viewpoints, promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (see Yang & Tang, 2018):

Interviewer: What about things like free speech, the freedom to say what you want?

Ling: And that's not a good idea because, you know, in China we, we have the freedom to speak. We speak, will speak freely, but we just don't like to. We are educated not to talk about too much about politics and the bad things about our party, the Communist Party. We have the freedom to talk about other political issues and about any other topics. And I think is the problem of atmosphere. I think for young people, we talk about [other] stuff and entertainment. Yeah, well, I think of other things on the Internet.

Huang more directly commented on the very real risks involved in asserting specific freedoms:

As I said before, we should earn money to live a better life. But in the Western world, there is more freedom compared to us. It seems Western people don't sacrifice their life by [speaking freely]. We are scared [for our] life, our, you know, we want to live longer and we want to make more money. This too is the most important factor in our our mind, I think. ... because I'm from the countryside in China, I know the life, [what] a poor life is like. Yes. Well, yeah. I think for me, if getting money and live better and live with my parents is, of course, the goal of my life.

Of course, an external observer might say that there is no real freedom of expression if citizens must avoid discussing politics and other big topics, or when speaking out endangers their life, as Huang intimated. Participants themselves, however, took a more pragmatic approach: rather than focusing on the things they cannot do, they look to the things they can do. One of the most important freedoms for them and their parents is the freedom to make money, be entrepreneurial and improve their living standards. Qian summed it up well when they said: "Human rights? [Long pause] Human rights. I don't really care about them. That's because I think I'm happy and I have money to live and it's enough, I'm safe." In a similar vein, a few participants cited the very fact that they were able to study abroad as living proof of the personal freedom they enjoyed. Rather more cynically, Zhang referred to this as the "gilded cage" where people can enjoy material wealth without political freedom. Others may brush off these limitations as trivial and unimportant in the larger scheme of things. Take Qian again: commenting on the censorship of social media around the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, they said that these restrictions were "just a little bit annoying, a little bit inconvenient" because most of the year they felt free to post what they wanted. Several participants reported using euphemisms, emojis and metonyms (e.g., "workers' rights" instead of "human rights") in their (online) communications to stay under the censor's radar (see Tang et al., 2016). Their pragmatism illustrates what could be termed the "glass half-full approach" in that it focuses on what is allowed rather than on what is not allowed. Interview participants had a keen (if selective) sense of history and showed an acute understanding of how much better off they are compared to previous generations of their family who had to endure grinding poverty.

Participants' willingness to condone with human rights violations could also be seen as confirmation of how powerful official propaganda in China is. If citizens are consistently deterred or blocked from receiving alternative reports, it is only to be expected that they will struggle to find fault with their government. However, as we will see later on, there appear to be relatively few obstacles when it comes to accessing foreign media. Hui, for example, pointed at an increased awareness of specific human rights issues among young people:

I think my friends, especially young younger people, they don't agree with many of the things that the country does to the Uighur Muslims. But you know, they, we can't say it publicly. So, I think the situation is becoming better on an individual levels from the point of awareness. But there is a long way to go for the authorities to do something.

He added, in mitigation, that countries like China and Russia need a "strong leader," but also reasoned that this was nevertheless not an excuse to ignore human rights. Others were even less forgiving, and they resoundingly condemned the lack of human rights in China. Thus, Chen said: "if you say something regarding human rights in public, you may get into trouble if you are in China," while a lack of freedom in their respective professions made Shu and Zhang decide on a change of career which is likely to keep them abroad for the foreseeable future. Despite such criticism, participants also believed that universal human rights standards could not be simply transplanted to China.

For the sake of completeness, it should be pointed out that there were two participants who were far less nuanced in their assessment. They practiced "literal denial" by maintaining that they had all the freedom they wanted in China. A good example came from Jia who said that they had the right to protest because they had learned about this in a politics textbook, adding that protests were allowed provided organizers had the necessary permits. They said that they were completely

unaware of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, describing these as “news” to them. Fen was similarly upbeat, referring to their activism as a member of the local chapter of the Communist Party and how they were able to make a positive difference. However, when asked if they wanted to become a politician, they described how they did not have the right family connections to be able to rise through the ranks, an implicit admission that certain freedoms were being denied to them.

### **“Fox News Are Always Saying Bad Things About China”: (Dis)trusting the Media**

One of the reasons why the Chinese authorities seek to restrict citizens’ access to the media is undoubtedly that they fear the impact of media reports that are critical of the Chinese Government. To Western eyes, the “Great Firewall of China” is a powerful symbol of a lack of free speech. If they were not already circumventing these restrictions by using a Virtual Private Network (VPN), Chinese students studying abroad certainly have the freedom to access media content that is routinely blocked in China. However, the extent to which this is an eye opener for them should not be overestimated. Contrary to previous research suggesting that Chinese students have comparatively more trust in Western media (Weber & Fan, 2016), several research participants spoke of their distrust when it came to Western news reports. Fen dismissed US news media as inherently biased and subjective in their reporting about China, adding:

Why do so many Chinese people, most of us believe our government is great, is doing the right thing? If the Chinese government is not good enough, we would not follow it, right?

It may not be hugely surprising for Fen to express these views because, as we previously saw, they were very uncritical of the Chinese government overall. However, even more critical-minded participants struggled to trust Western news reports. For example, Huang said:

Before I studied the media, I deeply trusted BBC, CNN and other media platforms. When I, when I got to know more about media and communication. Actually, now, I don’t believe or trust anything written in the news because of the media moguls and other interest[ed parties] ... their own opinion will lead kind of the reporting, [its] direction, right?

Hui also found it hard to know who to trust, given the incompatible reporting between Chinese and Western media:

Hui: So mostly I try to surf the Internet [for information] and to find out about the human rights situation in China, but there is much misinformation. So it is pretty hard for me to detect which is wrong or right. ... I researched the topic [of Uighur Muslims] in Chinese on Chinese Internet. I can see how the information says that the authorities are treating them well ..., but when I search the likes of YouTube or Twitter the information is negative. So it’s, it’s a kind of polarization. So it’s a huge gap between these two kinds of information. I think maybe the truth is not just who is evil or who is innocent. Maybe there are more some things I can’t see, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. And are you saying that you find it difficult to make up your mind because you don’t know who to trust?

Hui: Yeah. Yeah.

Iconic footage of “tank man,” which to the West constitutes one of the abiding images of China’s violent oppression of the Tiananmen Square protests, was dismissed by Hui as misleading: they said that a closer look revealed how soldiers tried to reason with the man blocking the tanks and that “friends” subsequently led them away to safety. Their interpretation could be seen as the denial of the visual evidence of human rights breaches described by Cohen. However, Hui’s reading of the events was more subtle than that. When asked if they did not believe that protesters had been killed, Hui replied that they were in no doubt that there had been fatalities.

Other participants also indicated that the negativity of Western news reports left them angry, confused and doubtful. Their reactions point to something that is close to factual denial: Their lack of trust in Western media prevents them from believing negative reports about China. One of the reasons why they still preferred to believe Chinese media reports is that they felt that these more accurately reflected their own experience, as Qian explained:

No, I don’t think it is true [that China violates its citizens’ human rights] because I have lived in China for 24 years. I am free. I am free to do anything. Legal, anything. Yeah. And sometimes I think we have a perfect, not perfect, the appropriate system of ... government.

Ling expressed a similar view:

Because, you know, in China, our life now is not like that, I think, the lifestyle in Shanghai and lots of big cities is very convenient. And we just live a happy life. Yes, we are happy with our home country.



When probed about Tiananmen Square, Qian argued that this was a thing of the past and that the new China, the China of their generation, was very different. By contrast, the Hong Kong protests were undeniably topical at the time of the interviews. A few participants chose to make sense of the coverage in Western media through the trope of double standards. The comparison was made with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the wide-scale protests in the US and also parts of Europe following the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020. Qian accused Western media and leading politicians of hypocrisy when they condemned the BLM protests as the work of a violent mob, whilst praising the same type of violent protest in Hong Kong as a legitimate uprising against China. This view was echoed by Shu. Fen doubted the authenticity of the BBC's coverage of the Hong Kong protests and felt that it made the police look more repressive than they actually were. At the same time, there was also support and understanding for the demands of the Umbrella Movement, although opinion was clearly divided between those participants (like Chen, who was born in Hong Kong) who believed that their grievances were legitimate and those who believed that China had every right to seek tighter control over Hong Kong because "Hong Kong belongs to China," to quote Ling.

### COVID-19

China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to strong geopolitical tensions, especially in US-Chinese relations, impacting Chinese international students' study abroad choices (Yu, 2021b). Interview participants expressed admiration for the fact that China had brought the pandemic under control when the rest of the world was struggling to contain it. Some even saw it as a vindication of the Chinese system of governance which was able to act swiftly and decisively by prioritizing the common good over individual rights: according to Zhang, it showed that "the socialist system really works". Here too, Shu could detect double standards at work in the Western news coverage. They cited the example of how one article on *The New York Times* website described lockdown in Wuhan and the restrictions the Chinese authorities placed on citizens as abhorrent, only for this to be followed 20 minutes later by a much more positive post bringing breaking news that a lockdown would be imposed in parts of Italy. "In the case of China, [they were using] human rights, [but] when they talk about what happens in most other Western countries, even if they do the same thing, they just say, OK, [they] are doing something good." Zhang, on the other hand, commented on negative reports in Chinese media about the COVID-19 policies pursued in the UK. They said that friends and family back home were greatly alarmed by Chinese news reports that the UK Government had decided to pursue "herd immunity" (basically, let the Coronavirus take hold and spread through the population so as to attain widespread natural immunity). Zhang was also concerned about reports that people in the UK were not wearing masks in public (see Yu, 2021b): "I always write something about COVID-19 on my blog because all my friends [back home think] I have a horrible life here. That's not true."

A striking effect of the pandemic was social isolation, making participants not only long for home but also made them see Chinese society and its system of governance in a more forgiving light. Thus, according to Ling:

From the beginning, I have wanted to live here in the UK. ... But, you know, since the coronavirus, I have stayed at home for almost four months, almost four months. I think life here is kind of boring [laughs] ... I have less entertainment activities. And less friends here. Kind of feel lonely. Yeah. Maybe I will go back to China. Yes, this is totally different. So, yeah, when I first came here, I felt so excited and I felt I had the freedom. ... I'm not so happy to be here [anymore] because ... most of the time I feel lonely here.

Experiences of racism and hate speech as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic exacerbated participants' sense of loneliness and isolation. They spoke of being too scared to go out because they no longer felt safe on the street. Hui stated: "And during the Corona crisis, I heard from many my friends, my Chinese friends here, they were abused on the street, although I, I haven't [come across] this [personally], but I am afraid to be abused too."

The COVID-19 crisis consequently not only colored the students' experience of life in the UK but also their outlook on human rights. Their sense of freedom and security was evidently impacted by the pandemic and a growing hostility to Chinese people:

Here [in the UK] I have always felt freedom and friendliness, kindness from the people. But from the beginning of the coronavirus, I have faced the three types of discriminations here. They [other people] didn't punish me or hurt me if they just used some words to hate me. (Fen)

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps no real surprise that participants were prepared to grant the Chinese Government a generous margin of error. Thus, in relation to the case of the whistle blower Dr. Li, Qian conceded that the authorities had made an error in trying to silence him, but they understood their decision, saying that "every government sometimes takes

the wrong decisions” and that the authorities probably thought it would have created too much panic if the public was alerted too early. Fen pointed out that allowing everyone to speak freely about such things in China would create chaos and that it would be better to let such information be made public through the official channels. Other interviewees were less forgiving of the Chinese Government’s handling of the pandemic but still offered a nuanced view. One such critical assessment came from Wen who said that “freedom of speech would probably have stopped the disease.” They were not just critical of China but of other countries as well. They felt that the Chinese Government had failed to learn the lessons of the 2003 SARS outbreak, blaming the problem on bureaucracy and its slow response, but interestingly they insisted that this was also the reason why Western countries had equally failed to contain the virus. They also felt that ulterior political motives were guiding the COVID-19 measures the US took against Mainland China. Chen, who was the most outspoken in their overall criticism of the Chinese Government, argued that China was to blame for rising tensions with the US: “They [China] refuse to cooperate. They refuse to be investigated. So, they are giving grounds for Donald Trump to bash them.” However, they also implied that US President Trump was making political hay out of the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Discussion**

Effectively stranded in their university accommodation, the screen was for the students who took part in this study virtually their only window on the world during COVID-19. They wrestled with the issue of who or what to believe in the midst of a pandemic, with its complex and evolving geopolitical dynamics. Some interview participants suggested that the human rights situation in the UK was suboptimal during COVID, citing issues such as hate speech. On the other hand, discussion of human rights in China was preempted by participants’ statements that human rights were quite simply “not Chinese.” Their response holds a vital clue as to why Chinese international students may choose to stay silent when the topic of human rights comes up in the classroom: if their first thought is that human rights are not Chinese, this may stop them from engaging with the teaching in a meaningful way.

Interviewees’ response to Western criticism of China reveals intense patriotism, something Zhang unambiguously expressed when they exclaimed: “Some things [about China] in the Western media are so negative. I think: do I support this or challenge it as a good Chinese?” However, it should be stressed that there was support for the idea of greater freedom for the Chinese people. Participants appeared caught between a deep sense of loyalty to their country, Zhang being a case in point here, and a personal desire, for example, voiced by Wen and Hui, to see the human rights situation in China improve. Wen clearly signaled that, despite human rights being important to them personally, it was a topic they could not discuss with other Chinese students.

This study has highlighted various examples of what appears to be textbook human rights denial. There was little by way of literal denial to be detected in the opening stage of the interviews. None of the participants made an attempt to deny the general premise that there is a problem with human rights in China. Indeed, they readily brought up the issue themselves. What did emerge, however, are some elements that fit Cohen’s implicatory denial, more specifically “contextualization and uniqueness” (the argument that China’s exceptionality in cultural, political and historical terms places it outside human rights norms) and also “condemning the condemners” (the apportioning of some of the blame to Western countries) (see also Brownell, 2012).

Nevertheless, there are some striking differences between government and citizen denial which are important in developing and critiquing Cohen’s original thesis. Denying human rights violations in an official capacity means taking a position that is disingenuous and indefensible. When it is performed by governments, it is a cynical ploy with which to escape liability and save face at an international and domestic level. Denial performed by citizens needs to be considered in a different light. Their rationalizations of human rights abuses represent a way of making sense of their lives without seeing themselves as victims. Rather than treating this as a form of complicity, it is much more instructive to consider the situation from the lived experience of citizens who genuinely feel a sense of freedom, despite the restrictions placed on their human rights. When citizens refuse to acknowledge that their country is involved in human rights abuse, it could be seen as an act of self-preservation. Fear also potentially plays a role. Although some participants in this study indicated that they were cautious when discussing with others anything the Chinese authorities may censor, it clearly did not stop them from doing so. For example, they would use euphemisms and emojis to evade censorship. Those who found their social posts had been blocked expressed annoyance instead of fear. Another possible explanation for citizens’ willingness to deny human rights

abuse is that it is the result of propaganda and indoctrination. Again, this cannot be ruled out especially considering that many participants still preferred Chinese media over Western media.

However, a more compelling explanation for participants' denial is that as middle-class urban Chinese they struggled to recognize the human rights problems detailed in Western media. Poverty, as Huang and Qian intimated, is perceived as a far greater issue than the lack of political freedom. The denial and disbelief so clearly articulated by Qian and Ling ring true because these problems are a far cry from participants' own comfortable existence and rising standards of living. Evidently, this is a singularly weak argument for the factual denial of human rights abuse: If recognition hinges on whether individuals have first-hand experience of human rights violations, many more instances of abuse around the world would go unpunished. On the other hand, one needs to consider what it would mean for Chinese international students to acknowledge that their country is complicit to human rights abuse. By implication, it potentially involves not just donning the mantle of victimhood but also disavowing their national identity. Doing denial in this context is aimed at defending the nation as an imagined community.

### Conclusion

This study had as its primary aim to learn more about Chinese international students' understandings of human rights; as it happens, their perceptions were bound up with their pandemic experience in the UK. By widening its scope to include COVID-19, this study contributes to an emerging body of scholarship mapping out the impact of the pandemic on international higher education (e.g., Bekele, 2021; Schiffecker, 2021; Yu, 2021a). Further research is required to refine our understanding of citizen denial and national belonging. However, what is clear is that othering Chinese students by confronting them with Western criticism of China's human rights record and turning the classroom into an arena of Western superiority is counterproductive. Instead, we need an inclusive pedagogy which is capable of accommodating the various iterations of the imagined community through which expatriate Chinese students view human rights criticism targeted at China.

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